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ABSTRACT

This paper presents preliminary information from the first part of a long-term study of curriculum development in a sixth grade classroom in Hawaii. It describes: (1) the teaching practices implemented; and (2) the literacy attitudes and habits that developed within this environment. A ten-year veteran teacher with teaching experience across the elementary school grade levels and her sixth grade, full inclusion class of 27 students are participating in the program. The teaching practices include sharing expectations and the offer of co-ownership of the curriculum for the year; inviting children to set up the room and develop and institutionalize the classroom guidelines; daily meetings as a class group to reinforce a sense of camaraderie and community pride; developing a non-competitive, collaborative learning and teaching environment; fostering independent learning; examining and monitoring relationships within the classroom, especially those that promote high self-esteem; developing methods of assessment that support rather than dictate the curriculum; and enthusiastically exploring the world of knowledge with the children and having fun doing so. The data, collected through classroom observations, a student survey, and student interviews, indicated that the curriculum, which is anchored in the assumption that people are valuable, able, and responsible, positively impacts the learning experience of children in this elementary classroom. (Contains 9 references.) (AA)

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# INVITING CHILDREN TO BE LITERATE:

# A CURRICULUM FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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## Introduction

*The central element of quality education is, of course, the teacher. Knowledgeable teachers are the core of an effective school program. (Stevenson, 1987, v)*

Outstanding educators such as Atwell (1987) and Routman (1991) make it look easy--a hundred and one incredible and new possibilities for learners and teachers! But for many teachers, the prospect of significantly restructuring their curriculums is no small challenge. "How do I start?", "Where do I start?", "What are the important questions I need to ask about my practices?", "How do I encourage the realization of the potential of all my students?" are familiar pleas. The notion of a learning-centered classroom community is currently being investigated in a two-year study of curriculum development at the sixth grade level. This paper will present preliminary information from the first year of study including (a) the teaching practices implemented and (b) the literacy attitudes and habits that developed within this environment.

## Theoretical Perspective

In recent years, there have been calls to move away from transmission models of learning and teaching, which emphasize the learner's passive receipt of knowledge, to models that emphasize the learner's active construction of an understanding of the world (see Au, 1993). Invitational education is a collaborative approach to learning and teaching that is founded on the premises that "people are able, valuable, and responsible and should be treated accordingly" and "potential can be best realized by places, policies, and programs that are intentionally designed to invite development, and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others, personally and professionally" (Purkey & Novak, 1984, p. 2).

Research examining the relationship between academic success and self-esteem lends support to this self-concept approach to learning and teaching. Coopersmith (1967) found that a child's self-perception, based on attitudes of approval or disapproval, shapes the extent to which the child believes herself or himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy. In short, high self-esteem leads to academic and social success, while low self-esteem works to the contrary (see also Fisher & Beer, 1990). In keeping, Routman (1991) underscores the importance of developing a happy, nurturing community where the teacher shares with the learner the enjoyment and success of the language learning experience and where listening, speaking, writing, reading, viewing, shaping, and moving continue naturally without interruption throughout the whole day (see also Maaka, 1994; Purkey & Stanley, 1991; Short & Burke, 1991). The establishment of such an environment is contingent upon components such as the active involvement of all students, regardless of ability levels; collaboration instead of competition, including the teaming of teachers, students, and parents; the presentation of subject matter that is integrated across the curriculum and that is of interest and pertains to the lives of students; a variety of instructional methods designed to cater to all learning needs; an emphasis on risk taking and feeling successful; and the treatment of students as self-motivated and invested learners.

## Method

### Setting

The school is attended by approximately 600 children from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds, although most are from lower/middle income families. The ethnic composition of the student body is very diverse, with the majority of students being a mix of Polynesian, Caucasian, and Asian. A large percentage of the students have "Pidgin" or Hawaiian Creole English as their first language and often struggle with the standard English requirements of the formal schooling system. Parents are invited to become involved in the school program, however, many have been resistant, possibly because as students they did not find the education system a positive experience. The teacher is a ten-year veteran with teaching experiences across the elementary school grade levels. Hers is a sixth grade, full inclusion class of twenty-seven students (14 boys and 13 girls, mean age = 11.6 years). The co-researcher is a professor in the field of language arts/literacy/curriculum development at a local university.

### Design

Work on this long term study formally began during the fall of 1994 in response to growing concerns that traditional transmission models of instruction, which adopt a prescriptive "one size fits all" approach to education, were ineffective for the children at this school. During the summer months preceding the school year, the teacher and co-researcher conducted weekly meetings in the Hawaii style of "talk story" in order to establish a "starting point." By drawing on their educational experiences and beliefs, they began to redefine the curriculum in terms of a learning-centered community. As such, it was agreed, for the first year, to develop practices that would invite co-ownership of the classroom program, in anticipation that this would promote each child's feelings of positive self-worth and shared responsibility for success in learning. Data were gathered and read in order to identify salient patterns and themes within the classroom community. The teacher kept a journal that included classroom observations and reflections on her teaching and these were discussed at each meeting. During the meetings, notes were taken regarding student participation, performance, attitudes, and concerns; organizational decisions; curricular plans; teacher interests and concerns; and other related matters. In addition, data on the development of literacy habits and attitudes were collected through classroom observations, a student survey, and student interviews.

### Procedure

Teaching Practices. From the first day of class, the teacher set about establishing a learning-centered community. Her curriculum refocusing included;

* A first day meeting that began with a highly enthusiastic welcome, followed by shared expectations and the offer of co-ownership of the curriculum for the year.
* Establishing early co-ownership of the physical space by inviting children to set up the room and develop and institutionalize the classroom guidelines.
* Daily meetings as a class group to reinforce a sense of camaraderie and community pride. These were times for greetings, news and announcements, clarification of classroom guidelines, discussion of problems and concerns, recognition of successes, and the like.
* Developing a non-competitive, collaborative learning and teaching environment that involved

the co-planning of integrated, literature-based, thematic units of study, including the choice of books, activities, assessment methods, field trips, and displays.

* Fostering independent learning by encouraging the children to take risks and seek their own answers to problems (e.g., through resources such as computers, peers, parents, books, and videos), rather than rely on the teacher for easily accessible information.
* Examining and monitoring relationships within the classroom, especially those that promoted high self-esteem. This included an attempt by the teacher to have some form of positive, supportive interaction with each child, every day.
* Developing methods of assessment that supported, rather than dictated the curriculum. This included an emphasis on building strengths and addressing areas for concern.
* Enthusiastically exploring the world of knowledge with the children and having fun doing so. This was an essential part of maintaining high levels of motivation as the children moved from one unit of study to the next.

Student Literacy Survey. A forty-statement survey examining shifts in student literacy attitudes and habits was administered at the beginning and again at the end of the school year.

**Preliminary Findings and Significance**

The data gathered to date indicate that the curriculum, which is anchored in the assumption that people are valuable, able, and responsible, positively impacts the learning experiences of children in this elementary classroom.

It is clear that the teacher's highly enthusiastic first day welcome and personal "talk story" session set a secure tone for the rest of the year (Amanda--*You talked about yourself and no teacher has done that*. Crystal--*From that time on, I felt good around you. You made me feel comfortable*.). However, the initial "handing over of power" to the children by asking them to organize the classroom environment and rules and regulations was more challenging in practice than in theory, especially in a system that recognizes the teacher as the ultimate authority (Teacher--*I had to restrain myself from saying, "No! The two of you can't sit together, you'll talk too much*.). Similarly, some of the children appeared uncomfortable when given such freedom of choice (Mehana--*On the first day of school, I thought you were weird because the room was not fixed and the desks were not in order*. Andrew--*You mean we get to decide where we are going to sit?* Michael-- ..... *and we can move the desks, right?*). It was not surprising that during the first couple of weeks, several children embraced the notion of "freedom to be irresponsible" rather than freedom to work together to form a community of learners, as was evidenced by the number of seating changes due to inappropriate, off-task behaviors. And it was also a time when the teacher began to question the wisdom of inviting co-ownership of the classroom! However, as the weeks progressed, it became more evident that the children were viewing curriculum co-ownership as something that should be valued and approached with great respect and responsibility (Alan--*This is neat, We never had to decide how to fix a bulletin board for something we thought of.* Jordan--*How are we going to fix the room up this time?* Survey--*At the end of the school year, 28% of those surveyed [compared with 17% surveyed at the beginning of the school year] felt they did well in all school subjects, while 67% [58%] felt they did well in some subjects*).

The system of classroom governance proved especially effective and it was interesting to note that, in general, the children adhered to the guidelines throughout the year. The

reinforcement system that emphasized personal satisfaction as well as extrinsic rewards such as free assignment choices, field trips, and verbal praise helped maintain a high level of investment and motivation throughout the year (Teacher--*I work hard at mentioning the children's names in positive contexts as often as possible*. Carl--*You expected a lot from me, but I felt good about doing things. This is the best class*.). It is of particular interest that along with this willingness to self-monitor behavior, there was a lower incidence of disruptive behavior and absenteeism (in comparison with classes of previous years).

Although the classroom program was governed by the broader school curriculum, it was important that the teacher provided a plethora of exciting and challenging choices for the children. As they grew confident in their decision making abilities, the children readily accepted the joint responsibility for planning a curriculum that included a variety of interests and a combination of teaching approaches (Teacher--*The children soon learned the importance of reading and writing activities and that the things they learned in the classroom should relate to their lives*.). Within this learning-centered environment the teacher observed greater investment and motivation to participate in the classroom program (Mehana--*Ms. Lipka, you forgot to do reading response*. Farris--*If we go to the computer lab, we can use Kid Pix for our "Terabithia" report*. Survey--*94% [45%] of the children said there were times when they liked to read quietly on their own; 78% [64%] said they felt good when they found a book they liked; and 89% [78%] felt reading was most fun when they could choose their own books*), as well as improvements in the standards of work, including requests for more time to read and write (Alan--*I know I can read this part*. Jesse--*Can I go to the library to look for more books on Bosnia?* B.J.--*We'll have to do some more research on this topic. I think I'll write a story after*. Survey--*78% [36%] of the children said they liked to read; 50% [29%] said they liked to write stories and poems at home; 94% [74%] said they tried hard because they wanted to understand what they read; and 86% [56%] said they liked to read about things that they know*).

Cooperative work proved to be an enjoyable and effective way to learn, especially in that it promoted fluency in reading and writing and encouraged children to share their ideas (Amanda--*When we work together with other kids, it makes learning fun. Plus we can learn from them too*. Cherie--*Ms. Lipka, we read with Ami and now she can understand the story*. Survey--*89% [41%] of the children said they liked to talk about the books they read with the teacher and friends*). Teacher demonstrations of good learning habits by reading and writing with the children also proved effective, as did collaborative journal writing which allowed the children sufficient time to write and later, share their ideas (Ricky--*I like being able to work how I like*. Survey--*78% [43%] said they liked to write all kinds of stories*). Probably one of the most important aspects of the cooperative approach was the encouragement of parental input (Teacher--*I mail a postcard which simply states, "Ricky did a super job on his research". The parents and children love this!* Nadine--*Can I take this and show it to my dad and mom?*). As a result, this year's parent/teacher meeting was attended by over 80% of the parents. It was, however, a concern that only 22% [15%] of the children surveyed said their parents took them to the library on a regular basis.

Assessment practices focused on both the processes and products of learning. Portfolio assessment was particularly successful in encouraging children to set challenging standards and self-monitor their progress. Combined with this, on-going conferences with the teacher allowed the children to make decisions regarding the standard of work that would be achieved and problems that needed to be addressed (Teacher--*The children and I work together to set learning*

*goals, do mini-lessons on skill areas, edit papers, evaluate writings, or discuss issues that are on the children's minds.*).

Although the teacher had significant success in promoting most of the children's feelings of positive self-worth (Jennifer--*I knew I could do something wrong with my work and you or the kids would help me....., not laugh*. Survey--*70% [57%] said they were proud of their reading and writing*), this was more difficult than anticipated especially for a small group of children who had a history of failure within the school system. Attempts to break the cycle of low self-esteem and associated poor school performance at this age level became a daily challenge, often with varying degrees of success (Survey--*17% [25%] of the children said they worried that people would think they were poor readers; and 28% [40%] said they did not feel confident speaking in front of the class)*. As such, the results of this study lend strong support to the proposal that this type of esteem-enhancing curriculum should prevail at the beginning levels of the formal education system.

However, despite areas for concern, at the end of the first year, the data indicate rewards for all those involved. The teacher and consultant came away from their meetings energized, but most importantly the children talked frequently of feeling capable of achieving success and of school as a 'fun' place to be (Ian--*School is fun. We like it here because the things we do we are interested in. We don't do basal stories. The work is interesting, we get involved.)*.

## Concluding Comments

For the teacher, the true value of this project, lies not so much in the pursuit of an end goal, but rather, in an empowerment to change or to maintain practices as deemed appropriate. The second year of this study will continue to focus on the development and fine-tuning of practices that invite all children to succeed in the education system. Data relating to specific learning-related behaviors including self-esteem (Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventory) and locus of control (Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale) will also be collected.

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